Nihon-Bashi:
The Centre of the Shogun's Realm

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In 1603, a new shogunate was declared, under the Tokugawa family. Some thirty years since had elapsed since the previous one had collapsed, and it was nearly a century since the Ashikaga shoguns had lost effective control. Such a memorable event - one that would reconnect and solidify the Japanese states after such long dismemberment - had to be fittingly commemorated.

The Tokugawa were not yet in full control, and most importantly, the Toyotomi clan still possessed Osaka and its surrounding region. In their short time there, and before they had been expelled from Kyô (Kyoto), the Toyotomi had famously created a multitude of grandiose architectural projects to glorify their rule. Their patriarch, Hideyoshi, had built for himself a sumptuous palace, the Jûrakutei, and also the Hôkoku-ji, better known as the Great Buddha Hall, and the largest temple ever seen in Japan; he had also erected Kyô 's first city wall. Hideyoshi had died in 1598, but his ten-year old son, Hideyori was ruling in Osaka, well supported by a ministers, and Toyotomi building work has not stopped.

It was not always the case that new regimes in Japan demonstrated themselves via visible architecture. But the turn of the Sixteenth Century was one of the times it was so. It should be recalled that Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries were still freely operating throughout the land, expounding on the glories of Lisbon, Madrid, Naples and Rome. We know that numerous pictorial representations of European cities circulated among the Japanese warrior elite. It is not an issue of direct emulation: the Japanese buildings looked nothing like the European ones (even Christian churches were in local style). But the notion that new powers needed fine new buildings was raised, or perhaps awoken at this time.

In 1603, the Tokugawa decided to build something that would equal the Toyotomi monuments in visibility and to panache. They also intended the edifice to make claims for the centrality for they city, Edo (Tokyo), far to the East of cultural centres, and to dispel longstanding jibes about a small garrison town in desolate, distant 'Azuma' (the historical and derogative term for the Eastern seabord).

Edo was still swampy and ill-defined. Drainage work had been carried out in places, and some of the waterfronts had been strengthened; housing had been zoned, temples laid out and, of course, colossal Edo Castle had been rebuilt over mediaeval foundations. But still, a major architectural statement would offer a strong indication of intent, within what remained still a generally unimpressive built environment. Edo was entirely military in feel, so the monument should speak to future peace, benevolence, and reach of the new shogunate throughout the archipelago.

No documentation survives, but we can work backwards from what was done, on the ground. The Tokugawa commemorated their passage from being one warlord group among many to Shogun with a bridge, named Nihon-bashi. Edo had a wide river along its eastern flank, known as the Great River, which marked the end of the city. The new bridge was not built there, perhaps as technology was inadequate to effect such a wide span. But surely also, the point was not to linking Edo to the wilderness beyond, but rather, to bind it together, in itself. The Western reader may recall the psalm that laud Jerusalem as he finest city (ironic today) because 'it is at unity in itself'. Plenty of Japanese in this period knew the psalms too. The Tokugawa bridge was thus thrown across Edo's most central waterway, one of many dug around the castle, for drainage, transport, fire-prevention, and to thwart invaders. The particular waterway had as yet no name, so it was called Nihon-bashi-gawa.

Nihon-bashi was Edo's only fixed bridge (the other waterways were traversed by ferry). Slightly under 50m long, it was most impressive, with an elegant raised curvature, and iron bollards at its heads. More remarkable than length or attractiveness was the width, sufficient to allow a great volume of traffic, and this suggested that the authorities expected Edo to grow. The bridge took its name from this: 'nihon' means 'two carriageways'. A wooden bar was set in the centre, keeping the two lines apart, passing on the left. The bridge was a gift from the regime, to the people.

The facts are not sure, but a pun was clearly implied: nihon also means 'Japan'. This interior, Edo link was turned into an emblem of the whole realm. The shogunate declared it would be be official centre of Edo, and still today all points to Tokyo are measure from there.

The idea of celebrating the creation of the shogunate in this way needs some explanation. Many cities have planned centres. But there is no precedent in Japan Across Europe, cities have squares, with, say, palace, church, embassies and government ministries ranged about them; these squares often have symbolic names, redolent of power or virtue (Place de la Concorde, Trafalgar Square - though both built later). It may have seemed useful to the new shogunate to innovate, creating something that had never been seen before. The built a new idea of type of monument, and an international one. Any yet it was not a square but a bridge.

In Buddhism, the building of bridges was considered an act of merit. In ancient China, monks built them to concretise mercy and devotion. Bridges save people and animals from death. In Japan, many ancient bridges have a famous monk as the putative builder. Bridges are practical, but lead from a 'here' to a 'beyond' in a symbolic way. Here too, that was an international angle. In Japan, Christian priests were called *bateren* (from padre), but formal title was Latin, pontifex, literally 'builder of bridges;' the pope in Rome was the *Pontifex maximus*.

Because Edo had grown up in a haphazard way, it lacked the grid of formally-planned cities like Beijing or Kyô, with their straight, numbered avenues (Hideyoshi has restored the capital's grid). Edo was a castle town, and like all such, its streets met in a kind of patchwork, partly by chance, but was also to prevent attackers finding their way through the city. The view as one stood on Nihon-bashi was Edo's only planned vista, and it was exceptional. A person looked down the Nihon-bashi-gawa towards Edo Castle. The prospect was of authority and ritual control. The castle could be seen, but not approached. (Later, another bridge was built across the river, interrupting the view.) [Fig. 1]

Along both sides of the river were storehouses containing produce from throughout the archipelago, and the wider world. All is now gathered here, under the dispensation of peace. These stores were for goods going to the castle, and they lined the way right to its gate, suggesting provision and plenty for the elite.

The person saw the storehouses receding into the distance, but also saw something else. The castle was counterpointed by Mt Fuji. Mt Fuji was punningly called the peak that was 'unequalled' (fuji), or 'undying' (fushi). It was not visible from Kyô, but validated the Eastern area. The vista from the bridge was this a parallel of politics and nature.

This was a formal vista, but a bridge has two sides. The person crossing could look the other way too. That vector offered a complementary prospect: it was structured as an iconography of the populace. To the east of the bridge was the fish market. Fish was not yet Japan's staple food, for in many parts of the country it was expensive. Fish was not much eaten in Kyô, which is inland, whereas Edo was full of it, and boats came here directly from the sea. A market is mercantile and smelly, so this popular vista was to the rear. It did not impinge when eyes were directed to the castle.

Nihon-bashi therefore had two constructed vistas. But there was more. The shogunate collected here institutions of significance, deepening the meanings of the site. These were not visible from the bridge, being set in streets back from the river, but several important sites of Tokugawa rule were congregated here none the less, all in the westwards, or castle direction. Three buildings were of particular consequence.

First there was the mint, or Kinza. In fact, it predated the bridge, having been built in 1601. Its vast and well-protected area functioned as the shogunate's central bank (the Bank of Japan still occupies this spot, as the world's oldest continuously-sited national fiduciary institution). The street in front was named True Exchange (Honryôgai-chô), and regional moneys were converted here.

The second site was right beside True Exchange. It was called True Time (Hongoku-chô, though today written with different characters). The shogun donated to the city its most prominent time bell, was set up here, and from which all time was told. The city's eight other bells (at Asakusa, Honjô, Ueno, Shiba, Mejiro, Ichigaya, Akasaka and Yotsuya), picked up their time from this time. Several times bell lost to fire (in 1657, 1666, 1679 and 1711), but each time the shoguns donated a replacement. The size of each bell-house is unknown, but the last had a frontage of over 20m, and was 35m deep. A hereditary official maintained and rang it, Tsuji Genshichi.

A few houses away was the third site, called the Nagasaki House (Nagasaki-ya), also under the hereditary charge of an official called Nagasaki-ya Gen'emon. It was the hostel used by Europeans who visited Edo, specifically, by members of the Dutch East India Company on their annual visits. The Company generally arrived in springtime and stayed about three weeks in Edo. Their arrival and residence were major events in the political calendar. As the great haikai (haiku) master Bashô wrote,

The Dutch chief too
Bends his knee
Springtime for my lord
Kapitan mo tsukabawasekeri kimi ga haru

The Europeans brought with them valuable presents, loaded on horses, hence another verse by Bashô:

The Dutchmen too
Have come to the blossoms.
Horses' saddles.
Oranda mo hana ni kinkeri uma no kura

As the Nagasaki House and the time bell next door to each other, the Edo populace took them as a pair. The two sites indicated how the shogunate controlled both time and space. Another verse refers to this:

Here at least
He doesn't need an interpreter:
Surely he understands it –
The Dutch leader hears
The bell of True Time street.
Kore ni nomi tsûji wa irezu wakaruran kapitan no kiku kokuchô no kane

And another:

The True Time bell
Can be heard
All the way to Europe
Kokuchô no kane oranda made kikoe